

The Summer That Went Up in Smoke: Managing the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad During a Wildfire¹

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As he watched the smoke raising in the sky, Al Harper, co-owner and Chief Executive Officer of the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad (D&SNGRR) wondered what his next decision should be. He had read the letters to the editor of the local newspaper; many writers blaming his train for the 416 Fire located about 13 miles north of the city of Durango, Colorado.ⁱ The D&SNGRR had been closed since the 416 Fire started June 1, 2018. By June 15, the fire had burned about 33,000 acres, mostly in the San Juan National Forest. Fortunately, and miraculously, no structures had been destroyed. Harper felt the railroad had followed the proper procedures in the days leading up to the fire, which started on the first day local and federal government agencies implemented Stage 2 fire restrictions.ⁱⁱ But that didn't matter now. He knew he had to make some tough decisions going forward. The businesses in Durango, Colorado and Silverton, Colorado were suffering. Both cities depended on tourism during the summer months to make ends meet. The D&SNGRR was a major tourist draw and with the train not operating, tourists were not coming to Durango as usual, and not going to Silverton via the train. The people of Silverton especially were learning just how much they needed to diversify their economy so as not to rely so much on the tourists who rode the D&SNGRR.

Figure 1: Smoke from the First Day of the 416 Fire



Photo of the smoke from the first day of the 416 Fire, June 1, 2018 from Durango, CO.

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The Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad

History

The D&SNGRR had a rich 139-year history with southwest Colorado. It was a pillar of the region. The origin of Durango was established with the Denver & Rio Grande Railway in 1880. The railroad arrived in Durango on August 5, 1881 with the tracks to connect the 45 miles between Durango and Silverton completed by July 1882. The railroad was constructed with the intention of hauling mine ores – silver and gold.

Unfortunately, the region and railway had to overcome many challenges over the next several years. The silver mines were forced to close after silver prices dropped by 40 percent; Durango suffered a devastating fire in 1889; and the regions' rough terrain challenged the railroad with rock slides, floods, and snow; all of which compromised the financial stability of the train.

However, the advent of World War II and the need for uranium to build bombs revitalized the railway and region. The train was registered as a National Historic Landmark. D&SNGRR worked diligently to build the scenic tourist industry in the region. The unique opportunity to ride the historic coal-fired, steam-operated locomotive through the picturesque passageway from Durango to Silverton brought visitors from all over the world.

The Train's Scenic Rides

The D&SNGRR's famous round trip started in Durango, Colorado, entered the beautiful San Juan Mountains and traveled to the mining town of Silverton, Colorado. This was a 3 ½ hour journey. Then passengers spent two hours in Silverton for lunch, shopping, and exploring before making the return trip.

Figure 2: Map of the San Juan Skyway



Source: www.ColoradoDirectory.com

Background of Leadership

Al Harper was the CEO and along with his wife, Carol, was the co-owner of American Heritage Railways, the operator of several railroads including the D&SNGRR. Their success has been attributed to their combined experience in commercial real estate, retail, restaurants, and travel and hospitality sectors.ⁱⁱⁱ The Harpers instilled the values of hard work, humility, and ingenuity into their children and recruited several of them to follow in their footsteps at American Heritage Railways. Al had described the challenges he overcame throughout his career progression as, “I learned everything I know from experience. Sometimes I feel I got a doctorate in mistakes!” and, “Wish I had a dollar for every time someone told me I would never make it. Those people were great motivators.”^{iv} A former employee reflected on his leadership, “He truly cares about the community, history, the railroad, the people who ride and the people who work there. A favorite quote of his as told to him by his father is, ‘Always do your highest sense of right.’” (C. Gremmels, former D&SNGRR Accountant, personal communication).

John Harper was the VP and GM for American Heritage Railways. John began working for the family business while he was still in high school. He started with D&SNGRR as a locomotive laborer and after he graduated from Fort Lewis College with a degree in Business Administration with an emphasis in Tourism & Hospitality Management, he advanced into management positions.^v John has expressed, “I’ve been around railroads my entire life, so this business is in my blood, like second nature to me, and a deep passion of mine.”^{vi}

Crisis Management

The 416 Fire

The summer of 2018 commenced under severe drought conditions. The snowpack for the San Juan and Animas River basins were at 39 percent of the median level. Although forecasters had held out hope that the monsoon season would offset the lack of winter precipitation, the monsoons failed to deliver. On Friday, June 1st, a wildfire began in Rockwood which was located halfway between Durango and Purgatory ski resort. By Friday night, the fast-moving wildfire, known as the 416 Fire, burned more than 1,100 acres with more than 825 homes evacuated. See Figure 3.

Figure 3: 416 Fire Visible from Durango, Colorado



Photo of smoke from the 416 Fire, June 7, 2018 from Durango, CO. Photo by case author.

U.S. Highway 550 (which connected Durango and Silverton) was intermittently closed during the month of June and the D&SNGRR suspended service until July. These closures made access to Silverton difficult. On June 11, the Forest Service was forced to close San Juan National Forest for the first time ever to safeguard the area and prevent any additional wildfires caused by humans. The 416 Fire had, by then, burned 22,130 acres.

By the end of July, the 416 Fire was finally 100 percent contained. The fire was active for more than 125 days, burning 54,129 acres. Scars from the fire made the area susceptible to floods, rockslides, and mudslides. A flash flood in mid-July caused mudslides which trapped passengers on the train and washed away a campground. Highway 550 was temporarily closed again due to the mudslides. D&SNGRR tracks and some homes were severely damaged by falling boulders, thick mud, and rainwater. Al Harper explained, “This is the worst incident we’ve had happen to the railroad since 1970, when we lost 13 miles of track to a flood” (Semadeni, 2018).^{vii} See Table 1 for a timeline of related events that took place during the summer of 2018.

Table 1: Timeline of Events

Date	Activity & Detail
June 1, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 416 Fire Started Same Day Stage 2 Fire • Section of U.S. Hwy 550 Closed • 850 Homes Evacuated • 1,100 Acres Burned • D&SNGRR Stops Service
June 9, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1,300 Homes Evacuated • Section of U.S. Hwy 550 Still Closed, Pilot Car Leading Some Vehicles Through • 8,700 Acres Burned • Fire 10% Contained
June 10, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fire Doubles in Size Overnight • Smoke Advisory in Effect • More than 2,000 Homes Evacuated
June 12, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stage 3 Fire Restrictions Enacted – Coal Fired Steam Engines Restricted
June 13, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. Hwy 550 Temporarily Opens from Noon to 6 pm • Some Residents Allowed to Return Home • 27,420 Acres Burned • Fire 15% Contained
June 19, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • D&SNGRR Begins Running Service Between Durango Depot and Silverton with 3 Hour Layover
July 9, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vandal Targets Owner of D&SNGRR, but Chooses Wrong House Sheriff’s Office: “416 Fire Likely Motivation”
July 11, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stage 3 Fire Restrictions Downgraded to Stage 2
July 12, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • D&SNGRR Rolls Again After Suspending Service for 41 Days – Two Trains and 750 Passengers
July 18, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heavy Rain Brings Down Mud, Debris From 416 Fire Burn Area – Mud Covers Parts of Hwy 550 and Train Tracks Some Homes Damaged • KOA Campground Evacuated Due to Mud Slides - Campers Moved to County Fairgrounds
July 24, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Another Storm Brings Heavy Rain – More Mud and Debris From 416 Fire Burn Area – Covers Hwy 550 and Train Tracks Again More Homes Damaged • Train Stops Running: About 800 Passengers with D&SNGRR had Train Ride Shortened – Bused Back to Durango
July 28, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • D&SNGRR Runs Trains Again – But Departure from Rockwood Station North of Durango Due to Damage to Tracks from Mudslides • Damage to Tracks to Take Four to Six Weeks to Repair
July 31, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. Forest Service Spokeswoman: Cause of Fire • 54,129 Acres Burned • 416 Fire Declared 100% Contained - No Structures Were Lost and No People
September 10, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More Than a Half Dozen Residents and Businesses File Lawsuit Against D&SNGRR for Starting Fire

Stewardship and Fire Mitigation

June 1, 2018, 9:45 a.m., Al Chione, a former firefighter, “saw a ‘wisp of smoke’. He ran around his house for a better view, and by that time, there was no mistaking it – near a bend in the tracks was a fire,” he said. Chione said he had no doubt the train started the fire. “Absolutely none,” Chione said. “If I wasn’t sure, I wouldn’t say a word. The bottom line is the railroad started it.” Chione said the train hadn’t reduced fuels for several years through the neighborhood. It also hadn’t used a bulldozer to create a barrier (Shane, 2018).^{viii}

The railroad had 45 miles of track, with a right-of-way of 50 to 300 feet wide. The D&SNGRR could not logistically do fuel reduction (brush and dry tinder removal) every year along the entire line, Al Harper said. Instead, mitigation efforts were done on a rotation basis in addition to other measures to mitigate the risk of fire on drought conditions. It did extensive training, hired Southwest Conservation Corps to conduct fuel reduction along the 160-acre train tracks, and it hired a helicopter at a cost of \$140,000 to follow the train during the highest fire risk months of June and July. Pop cars followed each train about three to five minutes behind to put out flames from sparks flying from the train’s smoke stacks (Romeo, 2018).^{ix}

Due to these efforts, on February 28, 2018, D&SNGRR was named one of nine 2018 Wildfire Mitigation Award winners during the International Association of Fire Chiefs Wildland-Urban Interface Conference. Despite the recognition for their efforts, many members of the local community were looking to place blame for the destruction caused by the 416 Fire.

The Community Response to the 416 Fire

There were 49 letters to the editor regarding the D&SNGRR and the 416 Fire in the local newspaper, the *Durango Herald*, between June 1, 2018 and December 1, 2018. Twenty-three of the letters were critical of the D&SNGRR and twenty-three letters supported the D&SNGRR. Three letters were neutral. An additional letter praised the D&SNGRR for taking great care of their passengers when the train had to stop during a ride due to the mudslide after the fire (Stewart, 2018).^x

Most of the critical letters (13) discussed the fact that although the official cause of the 416 Fire had not been announced, many people “did not doubt” that it was caused by the D&SNGRR and they wanted Harper to take responsibility for the damage. One letter implied that Harper should have been arrested for arson. “If you knowingly or recklessly start a fire that endangers anyone, including a firefighter, that exactly fits the definition of fourth degree arson. Are the police waiting for the official determination?” (Doob, 2018).^{xi} Other letters (6) particularly discussed the decision of the D&SNGRR to run on coal instead of using a “cleaner” fuel. “Let’s be clear that there aren’t any economic or technical hurdles to converting ALL the steam trains to run on oil, natural gas, biodiesel, etc. – just ego and a lack of imagination” (Morris, 2018).^{xii} The remaining four critical letters took issue with the claim that the D&SNGRR was a large contributor to the local economy but claimed instead that it contributed to environmental damage. One letter writer demanded that the D&SNGRR, “should not be allowed to continue its operations. In addition to being a fire hazard, the train significantly decreases air quality (particulates and sulfur dioxide), exacerbates climate change and generates excessive noise pollution” (Schubert, 2018).^{xiii}

Ten of the letters that supported the D&SNGRR did so because of the positive impact the train had on the economies of Durango and Silverton, Colorado. “Every business in Durango and the surrounding area depends on the Durango & Silverton” (Mayer, 2018)^{xiv} “The train is the lifeblood of this tourist driven community and that of Silverton” (Gill, 2018).^{xv} A resident of Silverton, Colorado wrote, “I also want to remind train critics that the same train drives your economy as well as ours. The train attracts tourists from all over our country and around the world. If it goes out of business, Silverton will cease to exist as we know it and Durango will be severely crippled” (Boeder, 2018).^{xvi} As some people questioned whether tourists did indeed come to Durango because of the D&SNGRR, a person from Australia wrote, “I can attest, that the railroad is in fact a great tourist and enthusiast drawcard” (Brennan, 2018)^{xvii} and a tourist from Texas wrote, “I visit there as much as I can. The train brings me and my wallet. I am sure that I am not alone in my love for the D&SNGRR” (Comee, 2018).^{xviii} Nine letter writers spoke of how they did not like the D&SNGRR being blamed for the 416 Fire. “One might as well blame Mother Nature for the drought or for lightning that could have just as easily started it. Should we blame the Forest Service for suppressing fires for decades leading to uncontrollable burns?” (Horvat, 2018).^{xix}

Other letters mentioned how much Harper contributed to local charities and fundraisers. “Never, in my 21 years of being here, have I gone to a community fundraiser that Al Harper and his family were not at. Never once have I seen him leave his wallet in the truck when the community needs help” (Leeder, 2018).^{xx} And finally, people wrote about how the D&SNGRR is part of the history and heritage of the local community. “The Durango and Silverton is part of our heritage. It is a national landmark for a reason, and something my grandfather, who was raised north of Durango, cherishes to this day, as well as the Rio Grande and Western railroad altogether, of which this is a last and most important vestige. It is an indispensable part of Colorado’s identity and heritage” (McKeever, 2018).^{xxi}

Al Harper, who had co-owned the railroad since 1998, had built a reputation for being a generous community supporter and conscientious businessman. This was mentioned in some of the letters. “Al Harper is one of the kindest, generous-to-a-fault men I have ever known,” said Marsha A. Schuetz (Schuetz, 2018).^{xxii} “Pick up a brochure on the railroad and read number two under his personal philosophy for running a good business. They aren’t just words, he lives them. He contributes thousands of dollars every year to both Durango and Silverton and has turned the train with its free museum into the centerpiece of our town and our lifeblood,” Schuetz continued (Schuetz, 2018).^{xxiii} Rebuilding trust with their community became a priority for the Harpers.

Proactive Public Relations Initiatives

Every year the D&SNGRR celebrated the start of the railroad season with a free barbeque picnic and live music by the Bar D Wranglers, a local band. Train cars and railroad equipment were also on display during the Narrow Gauge Day event. “It is a shot in the arm for the local business owners,” said DeAnne Gallegos, executive director of the Silverton Chamber of Commerce. “Train season is a vital anchor to our summer economy,” she said (Simonovich, 2018).^{xxiv}

Then the fire started. Many community members demanded a public response from the D&SNGRR. Although he had heard of other possible causes of the fire, Al Harper said he and

his family would not shrink from responsibility. “This is our home,” Al Harper said. “No one feels worse about what’s going on than I do. We’ve never spared cost or manpower. The past two weeks prompted a sort of self-reflection. Whether the Durango train started the fire or not, the railroad wants to ensure it poses no greater fire danger to the area in drought years,” Harper continued. “We are looking at everything,” he said. “I don’t want this to ever happen again” (Romeo, 2018).^{xxv}

The legal and financial implications of taking responsibility for the fire began to shift the tone in their external messaging. “The Durango & Silver Narrow Gauge Railroad is not taking responsibility for the fire, but that could change based on the outcome of local and federal fire investigations,” said John Harper in a statement to the press. “We don’t know who or what started it yet,” he said. “It’s not that we will never take responsibility, it’s just that right now, because we don’t have the facts, we’re not going to take initial responsibility until the investigation process is finished. We are working with the investigators to see what the cause is,” Harper continued. “There are three possible causes right now. Whichever one of the causes it happens to be then we will work with them to find a solution” (Shane, 2018).^{xxvi}

Crisis Impacts

Durango Economy

Durango, Colorado was a small city of about 18,465 residents.^{xxvii} As the county seat and home to a small liberal arts college, it had become the governmental, retail, and cultural “hub city” of southwestern Colorado. People came to the city for a variety of reasons, but tourism was a major economic driver. Through careful preservation of its historic western architecture, the city had a lively downtown filled with the arts and shopping.

Although many tourists came to experience the D&SNGRR, there were several other reasons they visited Durango. Durango was situated within easy driving distance of Mesa Verde National Park and Purgatory Ski Resort. Furthermore, the area provided abundant opportunities for biking, skiing/boarding, hiking, white water rafting, kayaking, hunting, and fishing.

Durango was the largest city located in La Plata County. The population of La Plata County was 55,589 people (United States Census Bureau, 2019).^{xxviii} The economic indicators of Durango in many ways mirrored that of La Plata County. According to Region 9 Economic Development District estimates, the number of jobs generated by the tourism industry in La Plata County in 2017 (the most recent data available) was 26 percent of total jobs generated, larger than any other industry in the County (Region 9 Economic Development District of Southwest Colorado, 2019).^{xxix}

Silverton Economy

Silverton, Colorado was the midpoint to many mining camps when the town site was created in 1874. In July 1882 the first train operated by the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad rolled in to Silverton from Durango. According to its Chamber of Commerce, “By 1883, Silverton boasted of having a population of 2,000 people with 400 buildings – 2 banks, 5 laundries, 29 saloons, several hotels and a bawdy red-light district – Notorious Blair Street” (Silverton Chamber of Commerce, 2019).^{xxx}

Due to the declining demand and a declining price for silver, mining in Silverton closed in the early 1990s. Silverton's economy came to rely on summer tourists delivered by train or auto to its elevation of 9,318 feet. Silverton was in San Juan County, noted for having the highest mean elevation of any county in the United States, at 11,240 feet. Silverton was the county seat and the only city in San Juan County. It had a population of 637 people, 62 fewer than the County (although during winter months Silverton's population did decrease)" (Silverton Chamber of Commerce, 2019).^{xxxii}

According to Region 9 Economic Development District estimates, the number of jobs generated by the tourism industry in San Juan County in 2017 (the most recent data available) was 52 percent of total jobs generated, by far larger than any other industry in the County. In 2017 the unemployment rate for San Juan County was 2.2%, down from 3.5% in 2016. The per capita income in San Juan County was \$47,138, 91% of the U.S. per capita income in 2017 (Region 9 Economic Development District of Southwest Colorado, 2019).^{xxxiii}

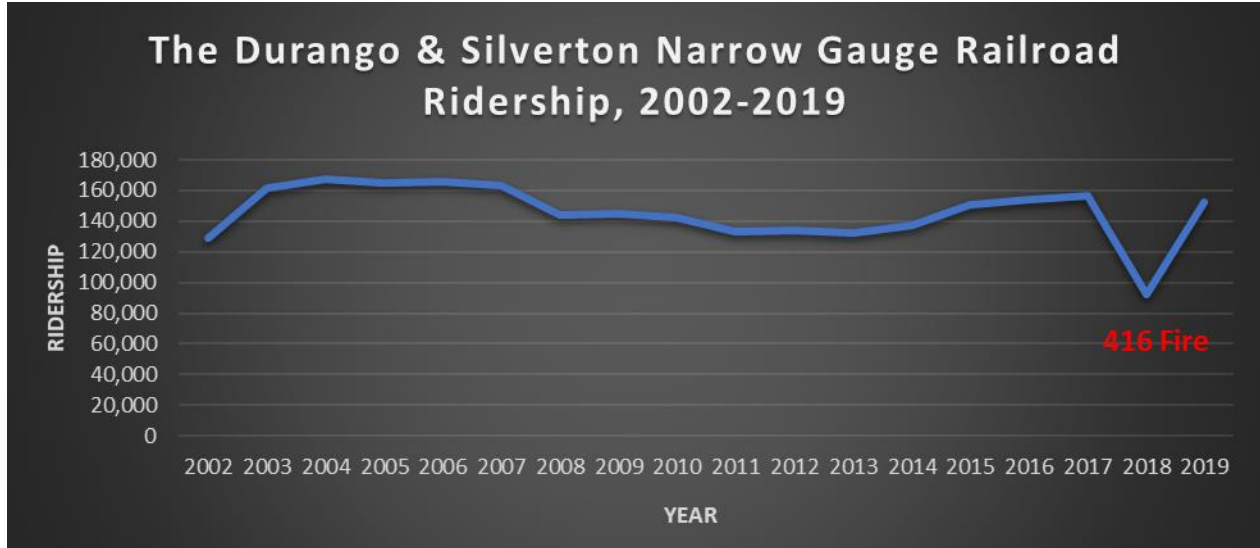
Economic Impact of the D&SNGRR and the 416 Fire

"The Durango & Silverton is, has been, and will be, the lifeblood of the city of Durango and surrounding areas. It's Durango's treasure," said Ray Mayer, a local resident. "The amount of money the train brings to this area is incredible, paying services in the city and surrounding area, keeping hotels full, keeping restaurants full, and keeping businesses open," said Ray Mayer (Mayer, 2018).^{xxxiiii}

According to Lockwood, about one million tourists visited La Plata County in 2017, and about 20 percent of them rode the train. "Any time you cut 20 percent of your draw, that's going to be a real hit," said Lockwood. The D&SNGRR was also the biggest cooperative advertiser with the tourism office, which increased awareness of the region to potential visitors (Armijo, 2018).^{xxxv}

In 2017, the D&SNGRR served 156,050 passengers. The railroad had expected to break the 200,000 mark in 2018. However, that did not happen. See Figure 4. On its busiest day, the railroad ran three to four trains between Durango and Silverton. On peak days, the railroad would carry 1,200-1,400 passengers on multiple trains (Simonovich, 2018).^{xxxvi}

Figure 4: Ridership on the D&SNGRR



Source: Region 9 Economic Development District of SW Colorado, Inc.

An often-quoted estimate of the economic impact of the D&SNGRR on the local economy was \$100 million in economic activity annually (McGuire, 2006).^{xxxvi} John Harper estimated that the economic loss from the summer stoppage during the fire was about \$33 million to the area (Forster, 2018).^{xxxvii} In the month of June of 2018 alone, the D&SNGRR canceled 31,000 reservations. June was the second busiest month for the train, after July. Al Harper estimated the railroad a potential loss of \$6 million from cancellations and expenses. “It’s been a serious strain,” Al Harper said (Romeo, 2018).^{xxxviii}

John Harper also stated, “The lost revenue from cancellations in June will also decrease the \$300,000 to \$400,000 in charitable giving the D&SNGRR makes annually in cash or donated tickets to nonprofits” (Armijo, 2018).^{xxxix}

According to Gallegos, when the D&SNGRR stopped going to Silverton on June 1, local businesses in Silverton saw a 90 percent drop in business (Armijo, 2018).^{xl} Wyatt Carmack, owner of Outdoor World in Silverton, said the closure of the forest because of the fire was particularly harmful to his outdoor-recreation store. He estimated that his June sales were down 70 percent and that the fire coming at the beginning of the summer would make things worse for the rest of the summer (Armijo, 2018).^{xli}

Other Local Economic Indicators of Tourism

Sales tax in La Plata County during June of 2018 was down 8.77 percent from June of the previous year; and was down 19.6 percent from July of the previous year (La Plata County, 2018).^{xlii} Lodgers’ tax was down 19.7 percent in the 2nd quarter of 2018 (from the 2nd quarter of 2017), and was down 8.2 percent in the 3rd quarter (La Plata County, 2019).^{xliii} Lodgers’ tax was collected by hotels and other overnight accommodation options such as Bed & Breakfasts. A decrease in tax revenue was correlated with a decrease in bookings and nights stayed, as well as decreases in purchases of other goods and services by tourists during their visit.

Arrivals and departures at the Durango-La Plata County airport did not appear to be affected by the 416 Fire. There were 34,903 arrivals and departures in June 2018, up 1.3 percent from June 2017. In July 2018 there were 37,435 arrivals and departures, up 1 percent from July 2017; and in August 2018 there were 37,435 arrivals and departures, up 4.5 percent from August 2017 (Armijo, 2019).^{xliv} There had been a slight decrease in annual passenger traffic at the airport from 2016 to 2017 (AviationPros.com, 2018).^{xlv}

Another important indicator of tourism in the area was visitors to Mesa Verde National Park. For the three summer months of June, July and August, Mesa Verde did see a decrease in visitors year to year from 2017 to 2018. The total visitors for the three months in 2017 were 113,071, 121,946, and 98,153 respectively. The same numbers for 2018 were 101,120, 107,734, and 86,494.^{xlvi} These numbers represented percentage declines for the three months year to year of 10.6 percent, 11.6 percent, and 11.8 percent respectively (National Park Service, 2017 and 2018).^{xlvii}

Environmental and Health Impacts of the 416 Fire

In the case of the 416 Fire, the natural environment had both immediate impacts with air quality and habitat destruction and longer-term impacts of increased flooding in the scar area and on the balance of the ecosystem, exemplified by the suffocation of thousands of fish in the Animas River from the ash and dirt entering the river from flooding in the burn area (Simonovich, 2018).

The quality of life of the residents of Durango and surrounding areas was also impacted. Durango was an active community whose citizens were known to take advantage of the outdoor recreation attractions in the region. Many were forced to replace their preferred outdoor activities with indoor entertainment due to the air quality during the fire. See Figure 5. The DATO released daily updates including recommendations for alternative activities and air quality measurements from San Juan Basin Public Health. The smoke within the city limits was more of a deterrent in the morning and cleared out later in the day, requiring residents to reschedule planned and preferred activities into a shorter period when the smoke was less of a threat to being outdoors in the afternoon.

Figure 5: Bellowing Smoke from the 416 Fire



Northern view from Durango, CO on June 12, 2018. Photo by case author.

Stakeholder Impacts

Train Employees

The D&SNGRR typically increased their staff by a substantial number each summer. They also supplemented full- and part-time positions with a considerable staff of volunteers. This staffing pattern helped reduce the stress of seasonality on the organization since bookings peaked in the summer with pulses throughout the rest of the year due to special events such as the Polar Express (see Figure 6) and The Great Pumpkin Patch Express. During the 416 Fire, 150 employees were furloughed from D&SNGRR and had limited opportunities to find work elsewhere as the peak tourism season was already underway (Armijo, 2018).^{xlviii} By that point, most businesses were fully staffed and unable to offer their existing staff their expected number of shifts due to the decrease in demand from tourists.

Figure 6: Elves at the Polar Express



Elves at the Polar Express in December 2017. Photo by case author.

Local Businesses

As stated, tourism made up 26 percent of employment in La Plata County (Region 9 Economic Development District of Southwest Colorado, 2019).^{xlix} In addition to tourism, the Durango area supported a range of entrepreneurial businesses and the corporate headquarters of the Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory, WorldPay, and StoneAge Tools. Tourism sub-industries like restaurants and attractions were directly impacted by the reduced number of visitors. Ancillary businesses were also impacted indirectly when a quarter of the population who were employed in tourism had limited discretionary income to spend during the period when visitation was down.

Evacuees

Perhaps the group that was most affected by the events of 2018 were fire evacuees. More than 2,000 homes were evacuated from the Animas Valley north to Purgatory Resort (Romeo, 2018).¹ Some evacuees, with the flexibility and financial means, chose to leave the region. Others were

obligated to stay in the area for professional or personal responsibilities. These evacuees had considerable expenses associated with their evacuation. They paid to stay in hotels, motels, or campgrounds. After paying for a motel room for a week, one couple chose to purchase a camper when the fire continued to grow, and the end of the evacuation seemed to be extended (E. Cartier, evacuee, personal communication). Despite the inconvenience, the fire service was able to protect all structures, and no one lost their home, though many evacuees later dealt with mudslides on their property from the flooding.

Tough Decisions Now and in the Future

Al Harper still had some tough decisions in front of him. What would he have to do to make sure the D&SNGRR remained a “local treasure” in the minds of community members? How much responsibility should he take for the fire damage now, and in the future? Given Al Harper’s entrepreneurial background and personality, his responses were probably prefaced with “full steam ahead!” As he explained, “To hear those whistles blowing, that made me feel really good. Our family loves this railroad and this community. We’re not going to let one crisis say we give up” (Romeo, 2018).^{li}

Furthermore, what should the people of Durango and Silverton do to avoid or lessen future costs if a similar event happens down the road? How does Silverton, for example, diversify its economy so that it doesn’t rely so heavily on the visitors from the D&SNGRR?

Notes

ⁱ The name of the fire came from the fact that it was the 416th incident that the Columbine Ranger District in the San Juan National Forest in Colorado responded to in 2018.

ⁱⁱ Stage 2 Fire Restrictions help reduce fire risk and prevent wildfires during times of high to extreme fire danger due to dry conditions. Many activities are prohibited, including camp fires, stove fires, and smoking outside.

ⁱⁱⁱ Leadership Team. (2021, January 18). American Heritage Railways: Who We Are. <https://www.americanheritagerailways.com/corporate-family/>

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^{ix} Ibid.

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